

Interpretation of Rooms— Sigmund Freud, his collection, the rooms and his patients

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"The world we share with each other is the physical world of perceptive consciousness and that is a spatial one!"
—Henri Bergson

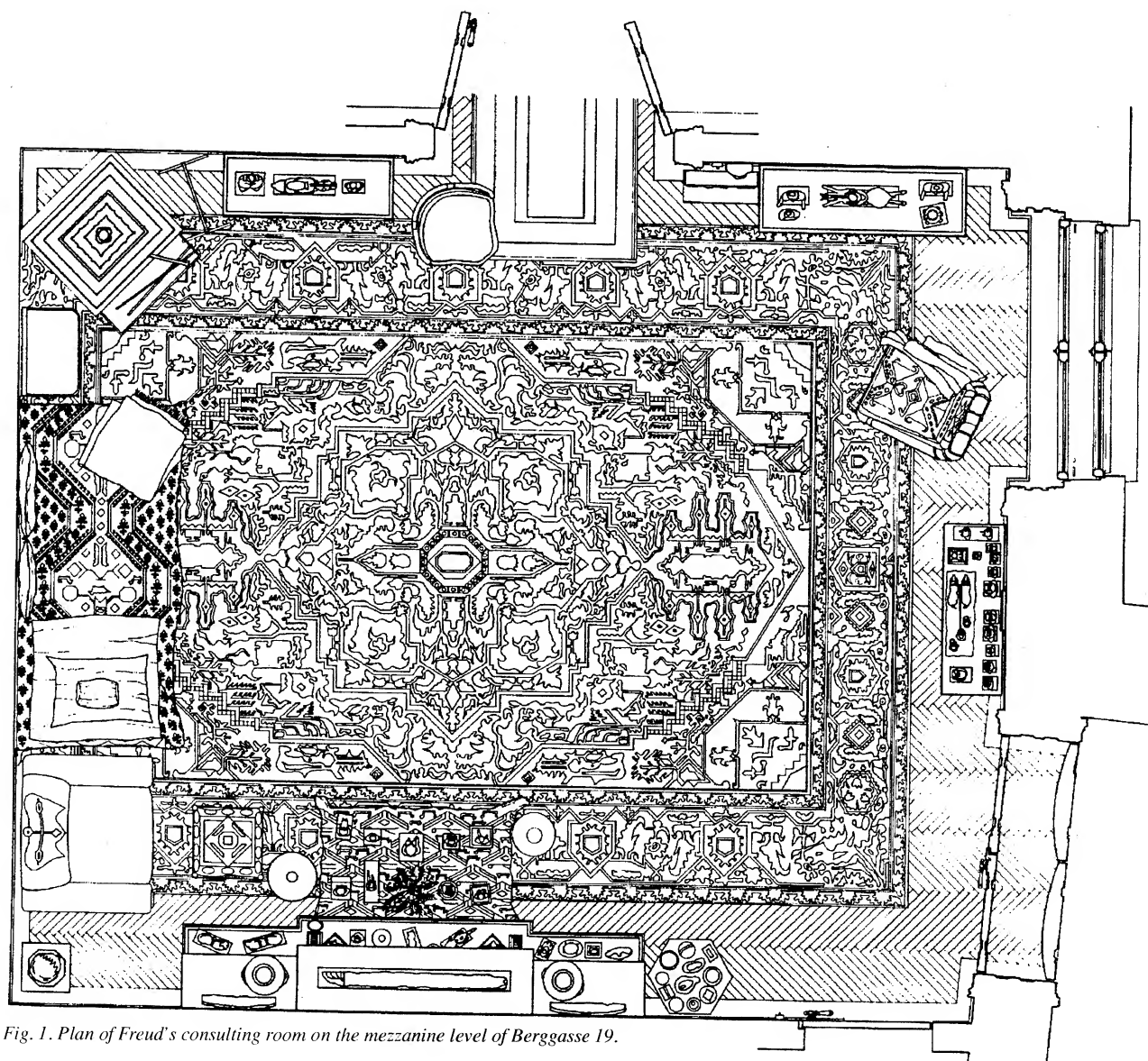


Fig. 1. Plan of Freud's consulting room on the mezzanine level of Berggasse 19.

It was Sigmund Freud's rooms which drew me to him.

I was astonished the first time I saw Edmund Engelman's photographs of Berggasse 19 in Vienna. I had no idea that Freud's work spaces were so densely filled and so haunting. Considering what Freud was doing within these spaces, it was also surprising to me that these rooms were so personal. I began to wonder what part the rooms and collection played in Freud's own thinking and the way in which he communicated those thoughts with others.

On April 21 1896, Freud lectured to the local Society for Psychiatry and Neurology on the etiology of hysteria. He stated, "The student of hysteria is like an explorer discovering the remains of an abandoned city, with walls and columns and tablets covered with half-effaced inscriptions; he may dig them up and clean them, and then with luck the stones speak - saxa loquuntur."¹

Freud often referred to his collection of antiquities, as his "audience", especially the selected statuettes which adorned his writing table and which he would greet each morning. His thoughts and meditations seem somehow bound to the way in which he would "fondle"² these antiquities and gaze at his collection, portions of which accompanied him even when he went on summer holidays. So close was his collection to him that a little over a month after he moved into Maresfield Gardens in London, in the last year of his life, Freud confessed to a friend, "It is true, the collection is dead now, nothing is being added to it anymore, and almost as dead as its owner of whom recently a bit has come away again (referring to a recent operation)... Therefore, there is also no progress with new works."³

The great importance of this collection to Freud and his work is well known, but what evidence do we have that the spatial arrangement he gave them has any meaningful relevance? Well, as I began reading Freud's writings, I discovered amongst his

personal letters, curious drawings done by Freud himself, of two rooms he lived and worked in during his student days. Perhaps these can begin to shed some light on this question.

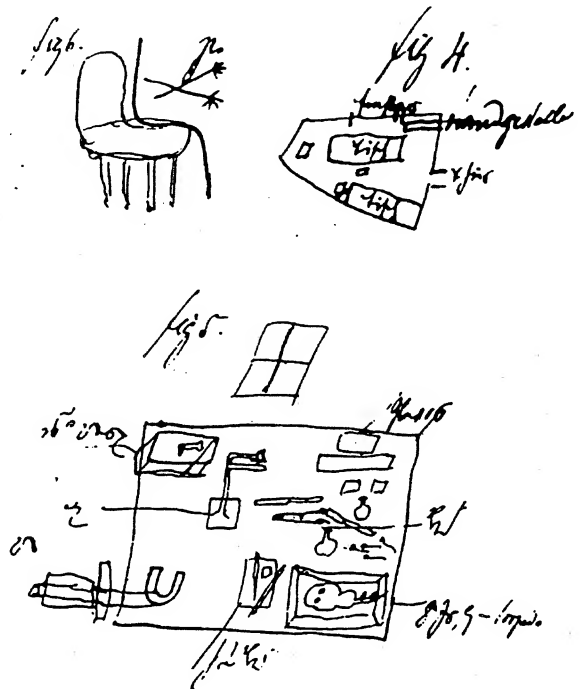


Fig. 3. Detail Plan view of Freud's room in the Institute Zoologische Station, including his work tabletop and chair.

The Rooms of Freud's Student Days

During 1876 he briefly lived and worked in the Institute Zoologische Station in Trieste, where he wrote a letter to Eduard Silberstein dated April 5 (Freud was 20 years old). Of particular interest, amongst other drawings in this letter which had to do with explaining his research, Freud drew and wrote about his workroom.

The drawings and text appear as a continuous mode of thought in which Freud is describing his visual and spatial world. Here, he is clearly not only aware of the spatial configuration of the contents of his workroom but deems it important enough to convey details of the exact location, right down to the arrangement of the items on his worktable. He also includes his own relationship to them depicted by the drawing of the chair and his posture. It appears that Freud's work life is defined by this constricted space he inhabits, which includes the furniture, instruments, specimens, note paper, pens and most importantly, his relationship to them.

We turn now to another room which Freud inhabited while working in the Vienna General Hospital and which he drew and

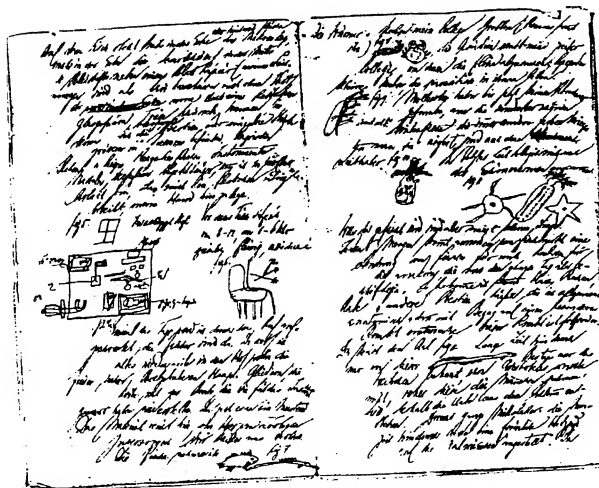


Fig. 2. Facsimile of two pages from Freud's letter April 5, 1876 to Silberstein.

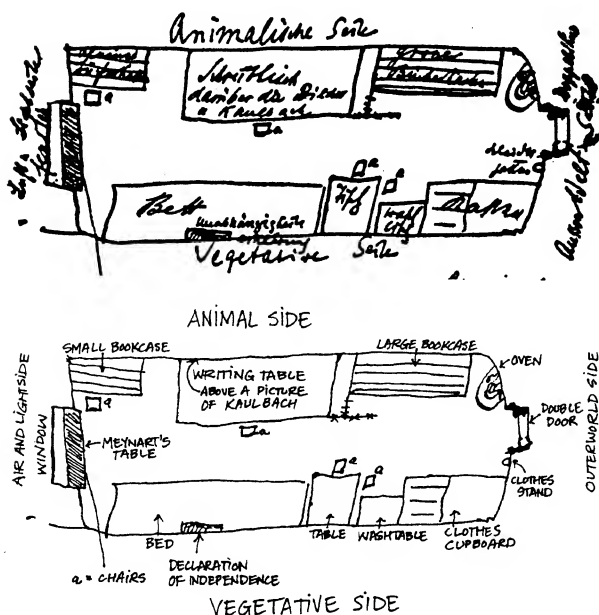


Fig. 4. Plan view of Freud's room in the Vienna General Hospital with translation by author.

included in a letter to his fiancée Martha Bernays dated October 5, 1883 (Freud was 27 years old).

"The 'animal' part of this cavern which fits me as well as a snail-shell fits the snail, is fairly successful, the 'vegetative' part (i.e. the one intended for the ordinary functions of life in opposition to the higher 'animal' functions like writing, reading or thinking) rather less so."⁴

As is illustrated by the plan view of this rather small room, Freud consciously utilizes the room and his organization of its contents to reflect and spatialize the mental separation he makes between his working and living life. This is accentuated when he categorizes these two longer walls of the room - "animal" and "vegetative". The other two shorter walls of the room are also clearly delineated - "air and light" for the window side and "outer world" for the door side.

In commenting critically on the room's organization, Freud states that the animal side "fits me as well as a snail-shell fits the snail" and is therefore more successful. This room is Freud's private 'inner world' which spatially embodies his psychological state. This in itself is not unusual, as most of us are this way with the intimate spaces we inhabit. What is striking about Freud's sense of inhabitation is the self consciousness he displays about this in his drawing and naming of the room's spatial structure.

Freud's Rooms in Berggasse 19, Vienna

On October 4, 1886 shortly after his marriage to Martha Bernays he opened a medical practice which mainly consisted of neurotic patients. Working with the traditional methods of the time which included electrotherapy and hypnosis, he soon discontinued the use of electrotherapy and chose to concentrate solely on hypnosis. During these sessions Freud would sit at the end

of the couch⁵ by his patient's feet. Of particular note here, is that under hypnosis the patient's eyes would have been closed.

By September 1891 Freud moved to Berggasse 19. Initially, his living quarters and office occupied one side of the mezzanine level. In 1892 as a result of an expanding family, he moved his practice down one level to Door #4 on the upper ground floor. This three room apartment, consisting of a waiting room, consulting room and study, was to be Freud's office until 1908. We have no visual documentation of this office although there are many written references.

By 1892, as part of his changing technique, Freud would place his hand on the patient's forehead. This would indicate that he was no longer sitting at the foot of the couch, but had moved to the head of the couch. The following incident was one of the main reasons he gives for this change in his physical relationship to the patient.

"I had an experience which showed me in the crudest light what I had long suspected. One of my most acquiescent patients, with whom hypnotism had enabled me to bring about the most marvelous results... as she woke up on one occasion, threw her arms round my neck. The unexpected entrance of a servant relieved us from a painful discussion, but from that time onwards there was a tacit understanding between us that the hypnotic treatment should be discontinued... so I...abandon hypnotism, only retaining my practice of requiring the patient to lie upon a sofa while I sat behind him, seeing him, but not seen myself."⁶

By 1900, in *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud advocates closing one's eyes only for self analysis, and by 1904 he states that it is not necessary anymore even for self analysis⁷. Slowly over these early years, patients were not required to close their eyes for the duration of the session. It is probably around 1896, when he entirely abandons hypnotism⁸, that he no longer requires the patient who is still lying on the couch, to close their eyes at all.

In giving up hypnosis, he was able to develop his method of free association which gave rise to the processes of resistance and transference, thus establishing the foundations of Psychoanalysis. Freud was extremely conscious and concerned with removing suggestibility on the part of the doctor towards the patient during their session. By extracting himself physically from the patient's view and not interjecting his interpretations, but remaining quiet and listening, he evolved a new and more effective technique. In so doing, Freud's new spatial relationship with the patient had significant ramifications for the development of Psychoanalysis. Now with their eyes open during the entire session, the patient was able to look out across the room. As the sight and sound of the doctor are withdrawn, the presence of the room and its contents emerge, along with the potential for them to play a distinct role in the relationship between patient and doctor.

1896 proved to be a crucial year in Freud's life. Besides his abandonment of hypnosis, on March 30 he was to use the term "psychoanalysis" in a publication, for the first time⁹. In October

of that same year Freud's father Jacob died. Shortly after his father's death, Freud along with his brother Alexander took a trip to Italy where he began the collection that ultimately became so important to him. Freud writes in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated December 6, 1896, "I have now adorned my room with plaster casts of Florentine statues. It was a source of extraordinary invigoration for me; I am thinking of getting rich, in order to be able to repeat these trips..."¹⁰

In the fall of 1908 Freud moved his office up to the mezzanine level at Berggasse 19. This was to remain the center of his work life for the next 30 years and is where the Psychoanalytic method used to treat neurosis becomes a paradigm for developing an understanding of normal mental processes. His work space was made up of two rooms of roughly equal size - the consulting room and the study. When Freud moved into these spaces, he had already been collecting for twelve years. Initially the collecting was slow, but as Freud's practice and reputation grew, so too did his passion for collecting antiquities. At first he collected copies, photographs, prints and plaster casts. However, at some point, probably when money was not as scarce, Freud made a conscious decision to solely collect originals from Egyptian, Greek, Roman and later Chinese periods.

We may not be able to understand precisely why Freud collected and assembled his antiquities but we can certainly make observations about *how* he spatially organized these rooms, and where he placed specific pieces or groupings within that organization. Together these two rooms at Berggasse 19 make up the "animal" or "work spaces" for Freud, as we saw in his earlier room. They show every sign of being given a carefully arranged organization.

Between these two rooms there appears to be a division of thematic content taking place. The consulting room seems to primarily address themes such as dreams, sexuality and life, whereas his study, as featured in the prominent back wall, suggests a focus on death. These particular thematic aspects, of course, are central to Freud's thought and work. All his life he concerned himself with attempting to explain these states identifying the basic life instinct as Eros. Freud described the evolution of civilization as "the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species."¹¹

Freud's Consulting Room

(For purposes of this paper, I will focus on the space directly surrounding the patient)

The consulting room functioned as a confessional of dreams where through transference and interpretation, Freud analyzed the lives of his patients. Within this room are found smaller and larger assemblages relating to dreams, the "instinct of life" (Eros), and autobiographical markers from Freud's own life.

For example, located directly above the analytic couch (refer



Fig. 5. Consulting room - Freud's "corner" to the left and the famous analytic couch center.

to figure five) we find a print of the Egyptian temple of Ramesses II, "The Rock-cut Temple at Abu Simbel" which Freud acquired in 1907. Lynn Gamwell, director of the University Art Museum at State University of New York speculates "With his sensitivity to word associations, Freud may have appreciated the closeness of Abu to *abi*, the Hebrew word meaning 'my father,' and Simbel to the German (and English) *Symbol*. If, indeed, Freud found Ramesses II... a suitable "father symbol," then Abu Simbel... loomed as an idealized heroic presence of Freud's Jewish-German father over his son's revolutionary couch."¹²

This suggestion perhaps gains merit if we look directly across the room at a similar height and location opposite this print and find an engraving by Pirodon after Brouillet's painting "La Lecon clinique du Dr. Charcot".

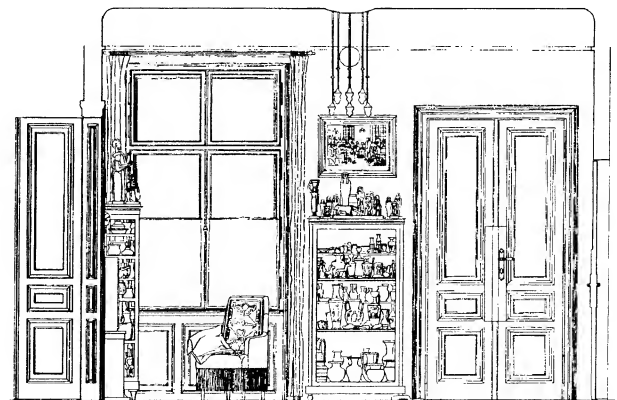


Fig. 6. Consulting room - "La Lecon clinique du Dr. Charcot" center and the entry door from the waiting room on the right.

Freud considered Dr. Charcot, with whom he studied in Paris, from October 1885 to February 1886, as a substitute for the father figure in a psychoanalytic sense.¹³

Just to the right of "The Rock-cut Temple at Abu Simbel",

we find a small reproduction of Ingres's painting of Oedipus interrogating the Sphinx. This clearly represents the solving of the riddle in one of Freud's greatest and most controversial discoveries, which he named the "Oedipus complex." To its right is a plaster cast of the classical bas-relief known as "Gradiva." In 1906 Freud wrote an essay on Wilhelm Jensen's 1903 novella "Gradiva."¹⁴ In Jensen's story this bas-relief plays a crucial role in the main protagonist's dreams and in uncovering the identity of a repressed love. The protagonist in the story, hung a plaster cast of Gradiva in a privileged place in his study, and Freud, was to do the same in his consulting room at the end of the couch.

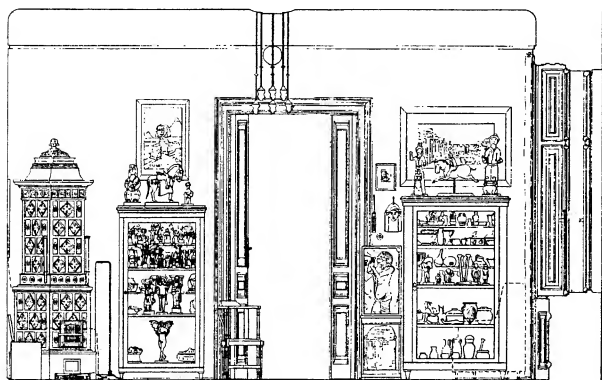


Fig. 7. Consulting room - Ceramic stove on left, "six statues of Eros" in glass cabinet just to the left of the open double door leading into Freud's Study.

Freud's collection included at least six statues of Eros, the god of love.¹⁵ By 1938, as seen in Engelman's photographs, all of the Eros statues to be found in the consulting room were assembled on various shelves of a single glass display cabinet located at the foot of the couch. This, of course, places them directly in front of his patients during analysis.

The patient's physical position during analysis raises another interesting question. Freud, as we have seen, writes that he sits behind the patient "seeing him but not seen myself." The angle of repose assumed by the patient's torso on the couch, however, was closer to that of a sitting position, which must have made it difficult for Freud to observe his patients from behind. It might have been possible, however, for Freud to augment his view of the patient's body through the mirrored back of one of the glass display cabinets in this room. The cabinet is located directly across the room from Freud. It was in precisely the position one would want for discrete observation: Freud observing it directly, the patient only peripherally, if at all. Such a reflected view would have placed the image of his patient behind the arranged antiquities, so the intelligibility of such a view is by no means certain. However it is interesting to note that all three glass display cabinets in this particular room had mirrored backs, and none of the cabinets in the study were outfitted in this way.

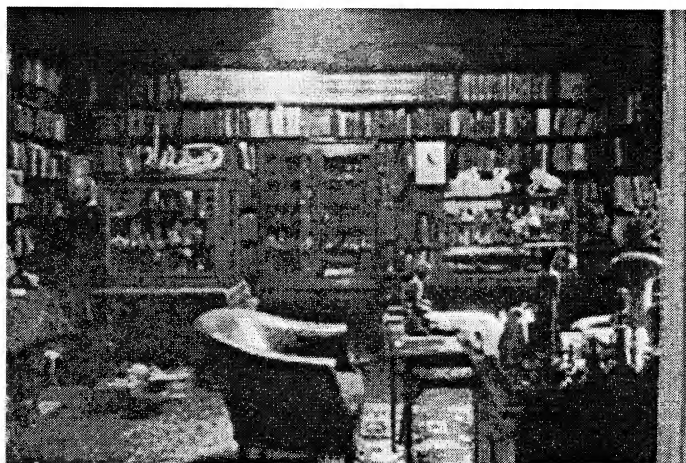


Fig. 8. Edmund Engelman's photograph of the back wall of Freud's Study

Freud's Study

Behind Freud's desk is what I have come to call the 'death wall'. This wall, seen from the consulting room through the double doors which Freud evidently always kept open,¹⁶ is an assemblage of antiquities based on the theme of death.

Located on the top of the glass display case to the left, is a large prominently displayed "Egyptian funerary barge". Egyptian tombs frequently contained model boats such as this one, which were to convey the mummy of the deceased to Abydos.¹⁷ Just to the right of the central display cabinet, hanging on the bookshelves there are two mummy masks. Masks such as these, were originally pegged to the lids of anthropoid coffins, acting as substitutes for mummies.¹⁸ Among these pieces is also a neatly framed seemingly incongruous photograph of a dog. This was Anna Freud's dog, "Wolf." Every year, on Freud's birthday, Anna (his daughter) would write a celebratory verse and it would be delivered to him tied around the neck of the dog.¹⁹ The verse would be signed "Wolf." This little birthday ritual which began with Wolf and continued with subsequent family dogs, made the dog a messenger, marking the passing of years in Freud's life. Presumably when the dog died Freud found this an apt place to hang its photograph. Directly behind Freud's chair was a Grecian vase. Upon his death, he was cremated and his family had his ashes placed within it.

Freud was to face life in the consulting room and work with his back towards death in the study. Both were ever present. It appears that he defined and shaped his understanding of them not only through his words, but also through the spaces he inhabited. It also appears, that Freud used these rooms and their contents to help facilitate the communication of his ideas with his patients.

Freud's Patients and Colleagues and Their Reflections on the Rooms

Both Freud's patients and colleagues continually referred to the collection and the atmosphere he was assembling in his consulting room and study. Hanns Sachs visited in 1909, just one year after Freud moved into these two rooms. He observed that while Freud's collection was "still in its initial stages...some of the objects at once attracted the visitor's eye."²⁰ He also stated that "Freud most enjoyed his collection when he could use his pieces to illustrate points he wished to make to colleagues or patients."²¹ In 1910, just one year after this visit, the Wolf Man began his sessions and recounts how the rooms presented a profusion of antiquities, offering a substantial impression that would be a "surprise to any patient".

Hilda Doolittle (or HD as she is referred to), was one of Freud's patients in 1933. She was a poet and is perhaps the most prolific reporter on the impact of Freud's rooms. For HD the collection in the consulting room and study was a metaphor and perhaps also the impetus, for many of her own associations. For her, "travel" with the Professor, during psychoanalytic sessions, into the realm of memory, visions, dreams and reveries were "as real in their dimension of length, breadth, thickness, as any of the bronze or marble or pottery or clay objects that fill the cases around the walls, and that are set in elegant precision in a wide arc on the Professor's table in the other room."²² Freud's rooms provided an "atmosphere" for her analytic sessions which were full of "living content". She wrote "... this atmosphere ... The gnomes or gargoyles, the Gothic dragons, bird, beast, and fish of the inner and outer motives, the images of saints and heroes all find their replicas or their 'ghosts' in this room or in these two rooms."²³ Arguably, for Freud, these rooms must have also provided him with the same, for as HD stated "He said his little statues and images helped stabilize the evanescent idea, or keep it from escaping altogether."²⁴

Freud believed that everything connected with the present situation during analysis represented a transference to the doctor which therefore proved "suitable to serve as a first resistance."²⁵ During transference the consulting room was in a position to act as an intermediary of sorts. Through the patient's open eyes, the physical presence of the growing collection assembled along its walls and spilling out into its space, must have often functioned as a filter for their transference. The room itself, not only defined the space of analysis for the patient, but must have also provided the spatial framework for Freud's own "current of unconscious thoughts"²⁶ as well.

In Closing

Access to Freud's thought has primarily been through his writings. However, he developed and assembled his thoughts through more than words. He carefully and self consciously assembled the contents of his work spaces in a manner that reflected the organization of his thoughts and beliefs. Edmund Engelman's

photographic documentation of these spaces in 1938, not only records the collection just prior to its "death," but also provides us with an important resource to be 'read'.

At 20 Maresfield Gardens, London, in the last month of his life, Freud's bed was moved into his office²⁷, perhaps so he could spend his last days with his "dead" collection ... It was time to say good-bye to the dearest and most enduring of his life-long friends. Freud once said of the Grecian vase he had kept behind him in his study "it is a pity one cannot take it into one's grave."²⁸ On the 23 of September 1939, before midnight Freud died an assisted death, in his house, 15 months after leaving Vienna. September 26 he was cremated and his ashes rest with Martha's there in the Grecian vase, a gift from his pupil and friend Marie Bonaparte.

I will now end with the motto Freud used for his book, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life", published in 1901.

*"Now fills the air so many a haunting shape,
That no one knows how best he may escape."*²⁹

NOTES

- ¹ Peter Gay, *Sigmund Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988) : pp 93.
- ² Hanns Sachs a member of Freud's inner circle remarked, "... he was in the habit of fondling pieces when he was talking (but not listening)." Jack Spector, "Dr. Sigmund Freud, art collector" *Art News*, April, (1975) : pp 21.
- ³ Freud wrote this in a letter to Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein. Harald Leupold-Lowenthal, & Hans Lobner, *Sigmund Freud House Catalogue*: Gottfried Locker & Hans Lobner (Trans.) (Vienna: Sigmund Freud Museum, Berggasse 19, 1975) : pp 56.
- ⁴ Ernst L Freud, Lucie Freud & Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (Eds.), *Sigmund Freud. His Life in Pictures and Words*: C. Trollope (Trans.) (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978) : pp 327.
- ⁵ The couch was part of his office furniture when he moved to Berggasse 19 in September 1891. "Among some notes that Marie Bonaparte compiled for a Freud biography is the following undated entry, in French: "Madame Freud informed me that the analytic couch (which Freud would import to London) was given to him by a grateful patient, Madame Benvenisti, around 1890" Peter Gay, *Sigmund Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988) : pp 103.
- ⁶ Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*., E. Jones (Ed.) No. 26, J Strachey (Trans.), (London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1950) : pp 47-49.
- ⁷ Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, The Young Freud 1856-1900 Vol. 1*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953) : pp 244.
- ⁸ *ibid*, pp 244.
- ⁹ *ibid*, pp 244.
- ¹⁰ Jeffrey Masson, (Ed./Trans.), *The complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887 - 1904* (London: The Belknap Press, 1985) : pp 214.
- ¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XXI*, J. Strachey (Trans.) (London:

- The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955-1974) : pp 122.
- ¹² Lynn Gamwell, "The Origins of Freud's Antiquities Collection", *Sigmund Freud and Art His personal Collection of Antiquities*. (London: Thames and Hudson with State University of New York & Freud Museum London, 1989): pp 26.
- ¹³ Toby Gelfand, "Sigmund-sur-Seine Fathers and Brothers in Charcot's Paris" *Freud and the History of Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 1992) : pp 31.
- ¹⁴ The title of Freud's essay is "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*".
- ¹⁵ Lynn Gamwell & Richard Wells (Eds.), *Sigmund Freud and Art His personal Collection of Antiquities*. (London: Thames and Hudson with State University of New York & Freud Museum London, 1989): pp 103.
- ¹⁶ I have found no reference to the double doors between the consulting room and study being closed during analytic sessions, only open.
- ¹⁷ The Freud Museum, London: *The Diary of Sigmund Freud 1929-1939: a record of the final decade*, M. Molnar (Trans.) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992) : pp 198.
- ¹⁸ *ibid*, pp 168.
- ¹⁹ *ibid*, pp 69 & 98.
- ²⁰ Peter Gay, *Sigmund Freud: A Life for Our Time*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988) : pp 170.
- ²¹ Jack Spector, "Dr. Sigmund Freud, art collector" in *Art News*, April (1975) : pp 21.
- ²² Hilda Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud, Writing on the Wall, Advent*. (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 1974) : pp 35.
- ²³ *ibid*, pp 147.
- ²⁴ *ibid*, pp 175.
- ²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVIII*, J. Strachey (Trans.) (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955-1974) : pp 126.
- ²⁶ *ibid*, pp 134.
- ²⁷ In early September the war arrived at Maresfield Gardens with an air raid alarm. Freud's bed was therefore moved to the "safe" part of the house. (Of all of the rooms that were presumably "safe" on the ground floor, it is interesting they would choose Freud's office), Peter Gay, *Sigmund Freud: A Life for our Time*., (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988) : pp 650.
- ²⁸ Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*. (London: The Hogarth Press., Vol. 3, 1953) : pp 158.
- ²⁹ Faust, Part II, Act V, Scene 5. It was Wilhelm Fliess who suggested this quote to Freud as the motto to introduce "The Psychopathology of everyday life" published in 1901. J.J. Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Art*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972) : pp 43.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures 1 / 5 / 6 / 7. Drawings by Natalija Subotincic 1998.

Figures 2 / 3. Sigmund Freud, *Letters to Eduard Silberstein: 1871-1881*., W. Boehlich.(Ed.), A. Pomerans (Trans.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) : pp 142, 146, 149.

Figure 4. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud 1856 - 1900 Vol. 1*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1953) : pp 67.

Figure 8. Inge Scholz-Strasser (Ed.), *Sigmund Freud Wien IX. Berggasse 19*. Photos by Edmund Engelman (Vienna: Verlag Christian Brandstätter 1993) : pp 60.

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